

To the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training Inquiry into Teacher Education

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Purpose

In this submission I will be concerned specifically with one of the terms of reference of the committee, namely:

7 (v) Examine the preparation of primary and secondary teaching graduates to deal with bullying and disruptive students and dysfunctional families.

Personal background

I am addressing this matter because I have over the past 15 years conducted most of the research on bullying in Australian schools and have published widely nationally and internationally (see www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/). I have also assisted a number of statutory bodies in providing information about bullying in schools, including the Federal Attorney Generals Department, the Federal Department of Education (as consultant for the National Safe Schools Framework) and the South Australian Education Department.

The responsibility of schools

It should be noted that whilst some children involved in bullying in schools are disruptive many are not, and many do not come from dysfunctional families. A far more important factor in accounting for bullying is the school ethos, which to some extent is controllable by the school. We find that some schools with similar socio-economic catchment areas report more than four times the bullying than others (Rigby, 1996). Teacher training can be expected to play a very important part in educating the staff in a school in how to minimise bullying.

The recognition of the importance of bullying in schools as a health and safety issue

Over the last 15 years or so there has been a growing awareness of the importance of this issue. This has been due in part to the expanding volume of social and educational research into peer victimisation. For example, in Australia it has been established that approximately one child in six is bullied weekly at school. Many of those victimised by peers suffer serious conditions of anxiety, depression and even suicidal thinking (Rigby, 2002a). Cases of suicide due to bullying at school have been reported in many countries. In Australia, approximately, 7% of children report having stayed away from school because of bullying. Some 15% of children report that they either never or rarely feel safe at school because of bullying.

Government initiatives

In response to such findings as these, Australian government bodies have examined the issue of school bullying. In 1993 a standing committee of the House of Representatives provided a report on violence in schools, known as 'Sticks and Stones.' That report contained a section on school bullying and insisted that the problem should be addressed. Ten years later, educational jurisdictions in Australia met under the auspices the Federal Department of Education, Science and Training to produce the National Safe Schools Framework, a consensual approach to how the problem should be tackled. It asserted the right of all school community members to feel safe at school. Among its recommendations was this:

Both pre-service and on-going professional development relating to countering bullying should be provided for school staff.

The current situation

We now have a remarkable situation in which, on the one hand, government bodies, parent organisations, educational jurisdictions and the recently formed National Coalition against Bullying, strongly supported by the Federal Government, are insisting upon the urgent need to address the problem of bullying in schools, especially through the provision of appropriate training, and, on the other hand, a general neglect of the problem by most teacher training bodies. The precise scale of the neglect has not been established; however, I can say from my experience of working closely with teachers in schools throughout Australia on a regular basis over the past 15 years that trainee teachers rarely, if ever, receive training in how to prevent bullying through curriculum activities or deal with cases of bullying in schools.

It should be acknowledged that the situation of neglect is not confined to Australia. For example, Nicolaidis and Smith (2002) examined the contributions by in teacher training in England and reported that there were few universities in which relevant training relating to school bullying is actually being provided. A similar situation exists in Canada. As in Australia, there is a general recognition of the importance of the issue on the part of government and educational jurisdictions and a lack of support from teacher training establishments.

Can bullying in school be reduced ?

It is sometimes argued that little can be done because anti-bullying programs are ineffective. The research evidence clearly refutes that position. In a report for the Federal Attorney General's Department on meta-evaluation of programs addressing bullying in primary schools program, I detailed numerous highly positive outcomes (Rigby, 2002b). In at least one Australian secondary school, positive results from interventions have been reported (Petersen and Rigby, 1999) In a large scale evaluation of anti-bullying interventions around the world, Smith, Pepler and Rigby (2004) provided evidence that programs can be effective in reducing bullying by at least 50% if they are well implemented. The reduction in depression, suicidal thinking and absenteeism represented by such a reduction in

bullying is highly significant. But it cannot be achieved without teachers being motivated and equipped with appropriate training.

What can be done to prevent bullying ?

The National Safe Schools Framework identifies some of the factors that can be addressed through better teacher education. Here is one recommendation:

The formal school curriculum should be used to promote positive peer relations among students

Currently, the curriculum is being utilised in this way for the most part in primary schools, but without the pre-service training needed to maximise its effectiveness. In secondary schools, where the problem of bullying, especially in the first two years, is most serious, relatively little is done. The problem is left mainly to the student counsellor

Much can be done, and is being done, in exceptional schools in promoting the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes and skills that can help to prevent bullying.

The National Safe Schools Framework also identifies the importance of risk management. In relation to the possible abuse of children by either adults or peers, it recommends that *risk assessment procedures should be in place*.

With respect to bullying, practically no teacher training appears to be directed towards early identification of children at risk, that is children who are highly vulnerable to abuse by peers or prone to act aggressively towards others. Moreover, anticipating the development of situations that lead to bullying and preventing them from occurring is rarely part of teacher training.

What can be done in dealing with cases of bullying ?

The stock method of dealing with bullying has been for many years the use of severe disciplinary action. While this may have its place, a good deal of bullying can be dealt with using problem-solving approaches which have been repeatedly shown to be effective in selected cases. These include mediation, the support group approach (sometime called the No Blame Approach), the Method of Shared Concern and Restorative Justice. These are examined in a number of books by Australian authors, for example, Lewers and Murphy (2000) Suckling and Temple (2001) Rigby (2003) Rigby and Thomas (2003) Thorsborne and Vinegrad (2004).

Generally speaking despite the supportive research evidence, these methods and approaches are not taught in teacher training establishments. If teachers wish to learn about them, they can find books, videos, articles and (occasionally) trained practitioners who can provide professional development sessions. It is extremely disappointing that these methods are generally not examined in teacher training.

Recommendations

If the issue that I have identified is to seriously addressed I would suggest the following:

- (i) An examination into the extent to which the issue of bullying in schools is being address as part of teacher education
- (ii) How the issue is being addressed (if at all)
- (iii) What plans (if any) are being made to develop further instruction and training in this area.
- (iv) What hindrances may exist to providing such instruction

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